Aboard the MARSHALL USTING ARCHARL USTING ACCOUNT OF THE PART OF T

by Tom Clancy

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Well, Glasnost is breaking out all over. Not only did the Soviets send two of their spiffiest new ships to Norfolk, but I got invited to a special tour-with camera-and even got to bring two of my daughters along with me.

After the normal 3.5 hour drive, arrived in Norfolk a little early and had a quick lunch at the Burger King in anticipation of being asked to have lunch aboard, or something similarly appalling. A PAO met us at Gate 2 and escorted us in, and there they were, tied up on the north side of Pier 7 in the destroyer/cruiser part of the base. Security was fairly tight but not overly intrusive.

Initial impression: Ivan does build them pretty. They go in for tall, flaring bows, and the overt display of weapons is reminiscent of the "fierce face" configuration of the pre-Dreadnought era. Throw in enough electronics masts to outfit the North American Aerospace Defense Command, and a subtly different shade of gray paint, and there you have it—oh, the red-star jack at the staff, too. I immediately loaded my Nikon with some 200 speed print film and went to work.

We were met by a Sov PAO whose English was pretty decent. Their summer uniforms, I should add, are an off yellow color, short shirt worn outside of the pants, and generally looking like pajamas, though shipboard officers more often wore something close to RN undress whites (difference in uniform between line and staff officers...?). Cut of their clothing and material were not impressive. The enormous rim-frames on the hats look less awkward in person than on TV, and on a hot day provide useful shade. Shoes didn't really look like uniform shoes, but cheap-quality street sort. Also, not much in the way of ribbons or badges. The EM's have the old fashioned hat with the ribbon down the back. If our guys wore them, the Marines would never stop laughing.

We immediately were taken aboard the USTINOV. She's (actually "he" in Russian) the #2 SLAVA, and I must say a striking ship visually. The brow had a carpet (there's an idea we might learn from! Metal brows can be slippery), and we went aboard at the quarterdeck, and we were immediately taken to the CO's cabin. (I think Language difficulties intruded; might have been the political officer's cabin.) Elevator, a small one just inside the door we came through. Wood on the door, maybe big enough for two or three people by the look of it. Rugs in the passageways, looking vaguely Persian, but not as well made. Big shag welcome mats inside the doors to the weather decks. Also some oil paintings done, I was told, by crewmen. Not great art, but better than anything I could do. Started heading up to the cabin. Starboard side aft quarter of the superstructure, two levels up from the weather deck. The ladders are steeper than ours and the treads less deep, though surprisingly the overhead room was adequate. (That was a relief Didn't bash my head aboard either ship. I generally do that at least once on any warship.) In the cabin, met the CO. 36 or so, handsome guy (like out of Paramount's central casting), Captain 22/r (surprisingly junior to

command a CG), from Moldavia. We shook hands and grunted at each other for a short period of time (translation makes conversation difficult), and he left to attend other business. That left us with the political officer. He introduced himself saying "Komisar," to which I replied "Zampolit?" and he nodded at once.

The cabin was of decent size, a sitting room and adjacent bedroom. Rugs also cut for the deck fittings, tables, etc. A portrait of Lenin, and the book case had all 24 hardcover volumes of his Collected Works, (Small size, like our book-club editions; the binding looked better than the paper.) Sink in the sitting room, plus a TV, closet space, and a refrigerator (1), which was larger than a US office one, but smaller than what you'd find in a kitchen, say about 8 cubic-foot capacity... maybe a little more. Tea was brought in; from Georgia, the guy said, and it was excellent. It was rather awkward in there for all that. About twenty minutes of get-aquainted. The PAO guy handled the talking. The cruiser's zampolit either didn't speak English or didn't want to let on, probably the former. He was about 5-8 dark hair and mustache, 40's. (Special Note: Russians in all cases appear rather old for their age. Maybe is the day-to-day stress of life in the USSR, or maybe the heat of Norfolk—the weather was tropical—was hard on them.) All in all a most hospitable gent. The guy positively deluged us with gifts, even gave me one of his cigarettes (strong, not terribly well made, and the filter was overly short). Mainly books, but some other stuff as well, including a model of the Battleship Potenkim. A surprising amount of wood paneling inside (fire and missle/fragmentation hazards...?), and while the ship was airconditioned, it wasn't anything to write home about—understandable, given the fact that they're not designed for the tropics.

I gave each ship a copy of Patriot Games and a collection of Far Side cartoons.

Then we got to tour the ship. The deck is painted (or was that the color of the metal...rust?) steel plates, with the weld marks showing quite prominently; I estimated the width of the weld joints to be 4-5cm or so, which was surprisingly large. I remarked that the deck looked slippery and dangerous and was told that they do it that way to facilitate ice-removal (both ships come from Northern Fleet). Lots of riveting where I would have expected welding (like on the superstructure). The ship had recently been painted. Which is to say, it appeared that a large graving dock had been filled with paint, and the ship sunk in it. For example, the hydraulic pistons and other gear on the large surface-to-surface missle tubes were thoroughly coated, as though with shaving cream, to the point that you wonder if the gear could move at all. The overall workmanship was crude by Western standards. In one case grossly so. The bottom of the 130mm gun turrets was just a roughpoured metal slab, very uneven (top and bottom edges appeared to be out of parallel) and pitted from the casting process, and the seams on the ballshaped turret were prominent, as though the individual segments hadn't been shaped properly. I'm sure the guns work, however. (Should have asked if they were rifled or smoothbore, but didn't.) We never get into anything important like the bridge or the CIC. It was just a walk-around tour. Disappointing but not especially surprising. I was later told that when US officers saw the Combat Information Centers (CIC) of both ships, they found displays roughly 20 years behind current USN standards.

Our guide made a great show of banging one of the SSM tubes and telling us it was empty, presumably to let us know that they had no intention of bombarding Virginia Beach. (If the birds had conventional warheads, why pull them?) There were a number of small, annoying deck fittings that might have been part of a wash-down system, and other small, cleat-like gizmos, plus evidence of others that had been chizeled off but not quite ground down. In the insurance business we'd call these items trip-hazards. I've seen other Soviet military hardware and found similar lack of human-engineering.

The SAM launchers looked rather odd. It would be interesting to see what the innerds look like; presumably some sort of multiple rotary system.

I also question the idea of siting the SAM VLS amidships, where it has to be somewhat masked by the superstructure. The deck is rather crowded, of course; not all that much open space. Lots of point-defense weapons and associated electronics in evidence. If there were UNREP stations, I missed them, though on American ships they are very hard to miss. I saw nothing like a way to UNREP SAMS. Not many damage-control stations on either ship—in fact, I fail to spot any. Of course, the way weapons are stacked up topside, maybe D/C stations are a waste of money...

An oiler/stores ship accompanied the two warships down from Severomorsk; civilian livery and while I ought to have taken note of the class, I did not do so. Later heard that the CO of the oiler had had the ship for 17 years! That's job security.

Next, off to the "Excellent," as the name was translated to me. The overt design philosophy said that the Sovremenny is the Slava's little brother. Both ships, by the way, gave the impression of being top-heavy, and while I was told that they are stabilized, I am not sure that I'd want to ride them in a blow.

Much of the same was repeated. By this time standing on the steel deck was beginning to make my feet hot. The poor Russians must have been frying. The skipper of Otlichny was 36, I was told, and in his 4th year of command. (By comparison, a typical command tour on an American FFG/DDG is 30 months; in other words, the Russians have at least one idea that many USN commanding officers would heartily approve of.) The guide told me that the ship has won every award there is, and that the skipper was the reason. Again, he looked old for 36. He also looked hot, tired, uncomfortable with his quasi-diplomatic duty, and pretty competent-he looked like he wanted to be out at sea, like any proper CO. Again we were whisked off by the political officer to his cabin (every officer cabin I saw had a TV). More wood paneling; the finish was very nice (polyurethane?), but the pieces

were not well fitted (uneven corners, etc.). This cabin was somewhat smaller than that on the cruiser, but also two rooms. It would appear that the "chaplain" in the Soviet Navy is well treated. ("Radiotechnik" stereo speakers on the bulkhead—East German?—without the cloth covering over the speaker horns) Taking note of our sweaty brows, he immediately fetched two bottles of "mineral water." The only mineral in evidence was sodium-chloride. Perhaps it was what we needed (electrolytes and all), but 20 hours later, I can still taste it. My daughters sensibly did not drink all of theirs, but I had an attack of good manners. The Russians drank theirs right down. I guess it's a matter of taste, but I have an urge to send them some Gatorade.

By this time I had the Sov PAO somewhat befuddled. He didn't expect me to love Russian music, and to be able to quote the call-to-arms from "Alexander Nevsky" (Vstavaitye ludyi Russkiye), and to note, quite honestly, that I think Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade is the most romantic bit of music ever done (especially with Itzaak Perlman on the fiddle). But that's okay. Nor did he expect me to be reading minutes from their parliament. "Not your average class enemy, eh?" I wanted to say, but I'm not that malicious. This people-to-people stuff is fascinating and for me very useful stuff. I was looking for information, and I got quite a bit. The Russian hospitality was very earnest, especially considering the fact that I must appear to their eyes to be an enemy and an unusually influential one at that. I really regret not having had a chance to sit and have a real chat. Never had a chance to crawl inside any of their heads. Too bad. I'm sure it would have been interesting.

The destroyer had a rock band on the fantail. Observation: Their rock music is every bit as dissonant and offensive as our rock music. Appalling that a country that has given the world such wonderful music should try to emulate that! (on this point my daughters and I are in disagreement.)

The individual sailors. All were of the expected age (18-22), with no obvious ringers about (there must have been some, of course, from the KGB's 3rd Chief Directorate, or lads who report to that part of the building at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square), but, again, they looked older than their American counterparts (markedly thinner, unseemly lines on the face, etc.; difficult to explain how a person can appear to be 19 but look old for his age; guess I'll leave that to an anthropologist, and simply repeat that it's true). Not terribly well groomed, but the heat could not have helped. Clearly they wanted to learn everything they could about America. On Otlichny we were finally able to link up with a few. (Due of my daughters.) Three kids were drafted, and some disjointed conversation was undertaken. They were surprised to learn that one was about to get a driver's license. Although we were told that most had studied English, they were very hesitant to display their language skills. They were remarkably ill at ease, more so than an American kid would be in similar circumstances, but an American sailor would not have gotten the pre-brief that these kids undoubtedly got. Other than that, sailors are sailors and kids are kids.

The Faux Pas of the Year, however, came from the can's skipper (or was it the zampolit?). On the way off my oldest made the mistake of saying that she wanted one day to be a naval officer. The Senior Soviet Officer Present remarked that the role of women is 'to give life [gesture of pregnant woman] and prepare food." Clearly the National Organization for Women has not yet made it to the CCCP. On that happy note we left the good ship Excellent.

Then something fortuitous happened. We got invited aboard the USS Harry E. Yarnell (CG-17). Once in the wardroom, I immediately got professional opinions of the Soviet ships. An officer noted that, having seen a Slava close up, he felt more confident than ever. Over dinner the Sov officers had expressed amazement that a 26-year-old ship like Yarnell could be upgraded (Harry E—we got a full CIC tour—has all new combat systems [SM2-ER, etc.] and looks pretty impressive on the inside: not to mention for cleaner and much better built). Question of Soviet flathats to their American counterparts: "How often do your officers hit you?" (My laughing response: "Once!") Remark from Soviet officer to American: They just passed a law in the USSR exempting college-trained (or college-eligible?) kids from service. That's-20% of Ustinov's EM's who cut loose as soon as they get home, and the officer went on, the ship's performance is expected to go to hell immediately thereafter. Soviet sailors, touring an American supermarket posed for snapshots next to a bin of tomatoes. Their kids also toured Busch Gardens "The Old Country" amusement park, and were feted at McDonalds, Pizza Hut, etc. In all cases, very strict control was maintained over movements: frequent rendezvous, etc.) Our guys were profoundly and negatively impressed by the quality of the Soviet crewmen, though they did find the officers quite competent.

If I have to go to war, better an American ship. The way Ivan stores his SSM's, any hit on either ship forward of the funnel makes for one helluva KA-BOOM, and all that top weight makes me nervous. What few passageways I saw seemed narrow. The ladders were too steep, and more twisted than on US and UK ships. I saw no fire-fighting equipment at all, but maybe I just missed it somehow or other.(A friend of mine did see a damage-control locker below decks, where he noted that shoring lumber was painted in place! This is truly astonishing.) I damned well don't miss it on one of our ships. The decks look appallingly slippery. The sailors did not look as relaxed or as competent as their American counterparts, though the officers did (at least the latter quality). (The relaxed competence of the EM's on our ships is something that always impresses me. It was CONSPICUOUSLY absent here.) I sensed a strong desire to make a favorable impression (almost child-like, in fact), whereas a US or UK scilor seems to know that a proper impression will be made and doesn't worry about it. The Soviets were intensely curious and quite wary, with the former generally overcoming the latter.

The heavy and recent painting bespeaks a strong desire to clean things up that is not as grossly evident on any other ship I've been aboard. Even

though these are manifestly "showboat" ships, it is puzzling that such an overtly frantic cleanup effort was necessary in what were above-average ships to start with—what, then, is the general Soviet standard of cleanliness and shipshape-hood? Moreover, despite all that work, Yarnell was in Far better material shape—at least in a cosmetic sense—despite being twenty years older than her Soviet neighbors. The age differential ought to have been more obvious—shouldn't it?—but wasn't. It should also be noted that the structural imperfections I found seemed mainly to be in non-critical areas. The turret floor doesn't have to be a perfectly machined piece of steel in order to put rounds on target(though it probably amounted to a few thousand pounds of unnecessary topside weight; a problem manifested elsewhere). I later learned that Soviet officers asked for and got a look at the damage-control school at Norfolk, and supposedly came away wide-eyed. Damage-control and fire-fighting are the semi-official religions of the U.S. Navy. The manifest lack of attention given these areas by the Soviets is remarkable, and has profoundly negative consequences for Soviet ships both in battle and with day-to-day operational casualties, as demonstrated dramatically by the losses—in both cases to fire—of a Yankee-class SSBN, and the only Mike-class SSGN. The presence of a surprising amount of wood inside both ships makes for both an increased fire hazard and a secondary missle hazard. As a result of these observations. I question the survivability of both platforms, and for that matter the question of whether or not the design philosophy contemplates survival of battle damage.

One final note: I saw something on both Soviet warships that you do not see on their American counterparts—long-wire radio antennas of the sort associated with short-wave radio communications. It would appear that the Russians have far less confidence than our Navy in the survival of communications satellites and the commo channels that come from them. Though illustrative of Soviet design philosophy as a whole—they are big on redundancies—there may be one important lesson there that we might learn from. Plus the question: WHY don't they think satellites will survive? Do they know something that we don't? Could be.

